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1962/10/22

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October 22, 1962

TO THE PRIME MINISTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friend:

First let me say how sorry I am that the proposed text of my statement has been so slow to get to you. We must use our own machine in such cases.

I am instructing our experts to confer at once with yours to provide the best possible legal case which will rest in the first instance on the Rio Treaty. But you are certainly right about the wider issues which arise in the nuclear age, and our people feel a strong case can be built on them.

It is this whole series of wider issues that has governed my initial decision. I fully recognize the hazards which you rightly point out, but I have had to take account also of the effect of that in the face of so obvious and deep a Soviet challenge. This is not simply or mainly a matter of American public opinion, and of the living under a missile threat. We all have been doing that for some time. But this is to do a breach in the conception of the international statecraft that it would do if it would destroy the confidence in the United States, especially in the light of my repeated warnings. It would persuade the world and others that our determination is low, that we are unable to meet our commitments, and it would invite further and still more dangerous moves.

I recognize the potential danger of a Soviet move, but in the light of the danger to our position in the world.

I am sure that the world will see this as a move to the right, and that it will be a move to the right.

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at variance with what all the Soviet experts have predicted that it is necessary to revise our whole estimate of his level of desperation or ambition, or both.

The particular points which you raise about European public opinion are understandable and have been much in our minds. We have some thoughts about meeting them about which we must be in touch. I also agree that we must keep in the closest touch about Berlin and that we can do this best when we have the first Soviet reaction.

Our naval commanders are instructed to use the very minimum of force, but I know of no sure escape from the problem of the first shot. Our best basic course is firmness, now. I look forward to our talk.

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FORWARDED COPY FOLLOWS

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//T O P S E C R E T// CITE CAP5495-62.
FOR S/S DUTY OFFICER SECRETARIAT, ATTN: MR. LITTLE. FROM
SITUATION ROOM. MR. SUNDY INSTRUCTED THAT THE FOLLOWING
MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT TO PRIME MINISTER OF GREAT
BRITAIN BE PASSED TO YOU AND ASKED THAT WE POINT OUT
THAT PARA. TWO IS FOR ACTION WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

TO THE PRIME MINISTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

DEAR FRIEND:

FIRST LET ME SAY HOW SORRY I AM THAT THE PROPOSED
TEXT OF MY STATEMENT HAS BEEN SO SLOW TO GET TO YOU. WE

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MUST USE OUR OWN MACHINE IN SUCH CASES.

I AM INSTRUCTING OUR EXPERTS TO CONFER AT ONCE
WITH YOURS TO PROVIDE THE BEST POSSIBLE LEGAL CASE, WHICH
WILL REST IN THE FIRST INSTANCE ON THE RIO TREATY. BUT
YOU ARE CERTAINLY RIGHT ABOUT THE WIDER ISSUES WHICH
ARISE IN THE NUCLEAR AGE, AND OUR PEOPLE FEEL A
STRONG CASE CAN BE BUILT ON THEM.

IT IS THIS WHOLE SERIES OF WIDER ISSUES THAT HAS
GOVERNED MY INITIAL DECISION. I FULLY RECOGNIZE THE HAZARDS
WHICH YOU RIGHTLY POINT OUT, BUT I HAVE HAD TO TAKE ACCOUNT
ALSO OF THE EFFECT OF INACTION IN THE FACE OF SO OBVIOUS
AND DEEP A SOVIET CHALLENGE. THIS IS NOT SIMPLY OR MAINLY
A MATTER OF AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION, AND AS FOR LIVING
UNDER A MISSILE THREAT, WE TOO HAVE BEEN DOING THAT FOR SOME
TIME. BUT THIS IS SO DEEP A BREACH IN THE CONVENTIONS OF THE INTER-
NATIONAL STALEMATE THAT IF UNCHALLENGED IT WOULD DEEPLY
SHAKE CONFIDENCE IN THE UNITED STATES, ESPECIALLY IN THE LIGHT
OF MY REPEATED WARNINGS. IT WOULD PERSUADE KHRUSHCHEV AND OTHERS
THAT OUR DETERMINATION IS LOW, THAT WE ARE UNABLE TO MEET
OUT COMMITMENTS, AND IT WOULD INVITE FURTHER AND STILL

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by N. M. [illegible]

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MORE DANGEROUS MOVES.

I RECOGNIZE THE PARTICULAR HAZARD OF A RIPOSTE IN BERLIN, BUT IN THE WIDER SENSE I BELIEVE THAT INACTION WOULD BE STILL MORE DANGEROUS TO OUR POSITION IN THAT OUTPOST.

I ASSURE YOU MOST SOLEMNLY THAT THIS IS NOT SIMPLY A MATTER OF AROUSED PUBLIC OPINION OR OF PRIVATE PASSION AGAINST CUBA. AS I AM SURE YOU KNOW, I HAVE REGULARLY RESISTED PRESSURE FOR UNREASONABLE OR EXCESSIVE ACTION, AND I AM NOT INTERESTED IN A SQUABBLE WITH CASTRO. BUT THIS IS SOMETHING DIFFERENT: THE FIRST STEP IN A MAJOR SHOWDOWN WITH KHRUSHCHEV, WHOSE ACTION IN THIS CASE IS SO AT VARIANCE WITH WHAT ALL THE SOVIET EXPERTS HAVE PREDICTED THAT IT IS NECESSARY TO REVISE OUR WHOLE ESTIMATE OF HIS LEVEL OF DESPERATION OR AMBITION, OR BOTH.

THE PARTICULAR POINTS WHICH YOU RAISE ABOUT EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION ARE UNDERSTANDABLE AND HAVE BEEN MUCH IN OUR MINDS. WE HAVE SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT MEETING THEM ABOUT WHICH WE MUST BE IN TOUCH. I ALSO AGREE THAT WE MUST KEEP IN THE CLOSEST TOUCH ABOUT BERLIN AND THAT WE CAN DO THIS BEST WHEN WE HAVE THE FIRST SOVIET REACTION.

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OUR NAVAL COMMANDERS ARE INSTRUCTED TO USE THE VERY MINIMUM OF FORCE, BUT I KNOW OF NO SURE ESCAPE FROM THE PROBLEM OF THE FIRST SHOT. OUR BEST BASIC COURSE IS FIRMNESS, NOW. I LOOK FORWARD TO OUR TALK.

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